

Federal Officials Tour Thomson Prison

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THOMSON, Ill. — The prospect of Thomson Correctional Center being turned into a federal prison that would house some detainees from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, earned the full support Saturday of Quad-City congressional leaders on both sides of the Mississippi River.

U.S. Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, and U.S. Reps. Phil Hare, D-Rock Island, and Bruce Braley, D-Waterloo, toured the nearly vacant facility with top officials from the federal Bureau of Prisons and the Illinois Department of Corrections.

After the brief tour, the group hosted a closed-door luncheon with about 50 local and county elected officials representing both states.

"We're in a competition, and it's a competition we have to win," Durbin said as the contingent met with reporters outside Buck's Barn, a longtime Thomson-area restaurant, hotel and golf course. "We gather here in full support for moving forward."

The senators, who were racing against the clock to get back to Washington, D.C., for a health-care reform vote, and the representatives pledged their support one by one. They all touted Thomson as the best option because of its state-of-the-art facility, which has sat nearly empty

since it was built in 2001, and the fact that relatively few upgrades would be required to house federal prisoners.

But the No. 1 issue for most of the legislators was the economic impact it would have on communities across the bistate area — particularly the job creation. According to the Obama administration, which has said Thomson is leading contender for the new federal prison, the proposal would create up to 3,200 direct and indirect jobs.

Hare, whose district has seen its share of job losses in the past year with factory closings and layoffs, said the economic impact would put \$1 billion in the local economy over four years.

“These opportunities don’t come often,” he said. “Putting people back to work should be our first priority.”

The prison is about 50 miles northeast of the Quad-Cities.

Harkin, who admitted he was surprised last week to learn the Thomson prison was still nearly empty, said he was convinced of the need in discussions the contingent had with Harley Lappin, the federal Bureau of Prisons director, who also toured the facility Saturday.

“We’re going to have to have more beds,” Harkin said, adding, “To rebuild what you have here would cost twice as much today.”

Durbin acknowledged the critics who have raised concerns about the safety of housing terrorist detainees from Guantanamo Bay in Illinois.

“There are fears that someone will blow up a skyscraper 150 miles away. But we safely incarcerate 35 convicted terrorists in Illinois today,” he said. “No one hears about them because the men and women who run the prisons ‘know what they’re doing,’ he added.

Across the country, 340 terrorists are imprisoned in federal facilities.

“You never hear about it because the job is being done and being done well,” Durbin said.

Braley, who toured the Thomson prison for the second time in less than a week, added, “The time for political fear-mongering is over.”

Those expressing fears, he said, have not asked the tough questions of Lappin, the Department of Defense and other corrections officials that the legislators have.

“My constituents want jobs to come to this area,” he said. “I support this decision if it is eventually made.”

Should the federal government purchase Thomson, it is proposing leasing part of the facility to the Department of Defense. Durbin said fewer than 100 Guantanamo Bay detainees would be relocated, although such a transfer would require new legislation. The government wants to house 1,600 prisoners in all in the facility.

But a small group of current Thomson correctional officers and their wives see the proposal as taking away jobs. Thomson resident Brook Boyson, whose husband is a correctional officer there, challenged Durbin on the point, saying that the current correctional officers will face a tough time getting hired for the federal jobs.

“The guys here have put roots down, bought homes, built churches, and we’ve got to uproot our families again,” she said in an interview as she wiped tears away.

Boyson said Durbin told her not to give up hope and that "it would be easier to get a federal job than they think." But she has her doubts.

He told reporters that the federal government would hold a job fair with the current employees to give them a chance at the new jobs.

"This is the best opportunity I have to bring jobs to my state, and I'm not going to miss it," Durbin said.